

Summer School for Officers

Story by MSG Bob Haskell

Greg Zuercher seemed stuck in a sort of no-man's land. He was a 43-year-old specialist and a small-vehicle mechanic in the Kansas Army National Guard. He had held that E-4 pay grade in the Air and Army Guard for more than six years. He was also too old, according to conventional wisdom, to improve his prospects by becoming an officer.

Zuercher,

however, marches to the beat of a different drum. He runs up to 400 miles and hammers out as many as 50,000 push-ups and sit-ups every year. So he was determined to join the officer corps as a second lieutenant, following the fastest road to that objective that the Army National Guard offers.

He was among 174 Army Guard enlisted men and women from 25 states following the fast track last summer. They were striving to become officers in eight weeks through an Army-accredited Officer Candidate School run by the South Dakota Army National Guard at a former cavalry post north of Rapid City.

Those who made it through the final four weeks of demanding field training in South Dakota and at Fort Lewis, Wash., graduated Aug. 11.

"I didn't want to go

through life wondering 'what if?'" said Zuercher, explaining that he had quit ROTC while attending Kansas State University. "This is fulfilling a dream that I have had for a long time."

The Army Guard's Regional Training Institute at historic Fort Meade in western South Dakota has for three summers now given many younger men and women the chance to fulfill similar dreams. It is also helping to solve the Guard's nationwide shortage of junior officers.

It is the first of the Army Guard's seven regional OCS programs to offer the fast-track, eight-week commissioning option for Guard members from the 54 states and territories. Pennsylvania plans to start a similar program next year at Fort Indiantown Gap, according to LTC Christopher Cleaver, that state's National Guard spokesman.

The Army has accredited the South Dakota program for the next three years, said Arizona Army Guard MAJ Dawson Dopp, the institute's executive officer for part of this summer.

That's important to potential officers who didn't earn a commission through ROTC or attendance at West Point or a state military college and now don't have 14 months to spend in one of the Guard's traditional officer programs or 14 weeks to devote to Army OCS at Fort Benning, Ga.

The South Dakota program appeals to older Guard soldiers who must get their commissions by their 31st year, or by their 35th year if they get an age waiver from their state adjutant general, Dopp said. Older candidates, like Zuercher, need special permission from the National Guard Bureau.

All candidates must have completed basic training and have 90 semester hours of college to be commissioned.

The South Dakota institute's 70-member staff, including 18 black-capped tactical trainers, or TACs, is

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Officer candidates Morris McLaughlin (left) and Matthew Jonkey used every minute, even in the chow line, to read and review material.



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six-week officer candidate school in Knoxville, Tenn., for 30 years. The Army Guard's considerably newer consolidated program appeals to men and women whose lives are crowded with other responsibilities.

Thirty-year-old Michele Ashby, for example, is a single mom who this fall began her senior year at Louisiana State University. Her son and her military career

are most important to her life, said Ashby, who spent three years on active duty.

Being able to earn her commission during two months in the summer meant she didn't have to take time from her son or her courses when college resumed in the fall, and that she will be able to get her degree this spring, Ashby said.

Spending eight weeks as an officer candidate, she added, has also helped her improve as a soldier.

"I needed to get my gung-ho back," said Ashby, who left active duty in 1992 and joined the Army Guard the following year. "I didn't expect the intensity of the first week, but it got me back to where I needed to be. I knew I would not go home, so I had to pull something from myself."

After failing her first land-navigation test, for example, she found six of seven stations and completed that course in 78 minutes on her second try. She passed with flying colors and began to believe that she, too, would earn her commission.

Two things seem to work for the officer candidates who have made it to the phase conducted at Fort Meade.

The candidates now get to tell the

TACs what they believe they must do to achieve success, rather than always being told what is expected of them, said CPT Teresa Wendt, a seasoned TAC officer.

"We don't just ridicule the candidates. We have to tell them what the teaching point is if we get in a candidate's face," she said.

"Their leadership evaluation reports emphasize their progress, not their potential," Wendt said. "If they didn't have potential, they wouldn't be here."

And Fort Meade is a stimulating place to learn the lessons of leadership.

It was established as a 7th Cavalry post in 1878 to keep the peace among settlers, gold miners and the Sioux people, who considered that region prime hunting ground.

It is reputed to be the first place in the country where "The Star Spangled Banner" was played every evening during retreat ceremonies. That tradition began in 1892, 39 years before Congress designated the song as the U.S. national anthem.

The Army moved out of Fort Meade in 1944, and the Veterans Administration has taken over the installation that now serves as a military post only during the few weeks in the summer that the Officer Candidate School is conducted there.

"I'm proud that the OCS program is here for at least a few weeks each year," said Chuck Rambow, director of the Fort Meade Museum. "That makes this a military post again." □



Identifying terrain features was one of the lessons that officer candidates, including the Virginia Guard's Ronald Johnson, used to master the great outdoors.

TAC officers also felt the pain of a 12-mile road march for OCS candidates at Fort Meade, S.D.



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